



## PRODUCT RECALLS

# Airbag Maker Takata Saw and Hid Risk in 2004, Former Workers Say



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Hiroko Tabuchi  
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Alarmed by a report a decade ago that one of its airbags had ruptured and spewed metal debris at a driver in Alabama, the Japanese manufacturer Takata secretly conducted tests on 50 airbags it retrieved from scrapyards, according to two former employees involved in the tests, one of whom was a senior member of its testing lab.

The steel inflaters in two of the airbags cracked during the tests, a condition that can lead to rupture, the former employees said. The result was so startling that engineers began designing possible fixes in preparation for a recall, the former employees said.

But instead of alerting federal safety regulators to the possible danger, Takata executives discounted the results and ordered the lab technicians to delete the testing data from their computers and dispose of the airbag inflaters in the trash, they said.

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The secret tests, which have not been previously disclosed, were performed after normal work hours and on weekends and holidays during summer 2004 at Takata's American headquarters in Auburn Hills, Mich., the former employees said.

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intention to determine whether anyone at Honda has any evidence that these claims are credible."

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Karl Brauer, Senior Analyst at Kelley Blue Book, says the incident could be an opportunity for other airbag makers. He later discusses the scrutiny over product recalls in the automobile sector.

Separately, materials reviewed by The New York Times cast doubt on Takata's claims to federal regulators that it had resolved manufacturing and quality control problems with its airbag propellant in the early 2000s. Takata has said, in regulatory filings, that by November 2002, it had ensured that there was "proper handling" of the propellants at a factory in Moses Lake, Wash., where it had traced problems with the rupturing airbags.

But as recently as April 2009, Takata engineers scrambled to repair a flaw in a machine at another factory in Monclova, Mexico, that made the airbag propellant more volatile, according to materials from a company presentation given that year.

Two former quality-control managers at the company's main distribution center in Texas, moreover, described in interviews a series of quality problems that arose as the company raced to meet a surge in demand for its airbags.

The Times reviewed internal Takata documents, emails, photos, videos and regulatory filings. Emails show workers raising concerns that airbag units were being delivered to automakers wet or damaged because of transportation mishaps. Closed-circuit television footage shows forklifts dropping stacks of the airbag units.

The dropped airbags were not always properly inspected for damage, especially in the early 2000s, according to the former quality-control managers who said they later pushed for stricter controls at the facility. The two spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fear of retribution.

Takata is facing renewed scrutiny for its handling of the defective airbags, which The Times reported in September had been the subject of a short-lived investigation by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that was closed in 2010 without any enforcement action. The federal agency has now reopened its investigation into Takata, a House committee has asked the Government Accountability Office to conduct its own investigation, and federal prosecutors in Manhattan have also taken an interest.

Behind the scenes, however, the former Takata lab employees said, the manufacturer wanted to know more. The tests on the 50 airbags were supervised by Al Bernat, then Takata's vice president for engineering, they said, and were unknown to all but a small group of people, that included lab technicians, fabricators and engineers. The employees said that they did not know under whose authority Mr. Bernat was operating.

The tests' results worried the technicians: Two of the airbag inflators Takata had retrieved from the junkyards showed cracks and the start of "rapid disassembly" during the tests, Takata's preferred term for explosion, according to the two people. They said Takata engineers at the time theorized that a problem with the welding of the inflator's canister, intended to hold the airbag's explosives, made its structure vulnerable to splitting and rupturing. The two people said engineers designed prototypes for possible fixes, including a second canister to strengthen the unit.

But after three months, they said, the testing was ordered halted. The lab employees were also instructed that all data, including video and computer backups, be destroyed. Inflators and prototypes of fixes were also to be disassembled and disposed of in a scrap-metal Dumpster, the senior lab employee said. No explanation was offered, the employee said, though the order was not considered surprising given the secret nature of the testing.

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As for the two problematic airbag inflators, Mr. Bernat, the supervisor, told people at the time that they were not significant because they had been retrieved from cars with cracked windshields and were likely "corrupted by weather," according to the two former employees.

Reached at his home in Rochester Hills, Mich., Mr. Bernat declined to comment and referred questions to his former employer. Takata also declined to comment.

As automakers have recalled the airbags in recent years, Takata has suggested that weather plays a significant role in making its airbags prone to rupture. Takata said humidity could hurt the stability of the airbag's explosives.

In explaining the effect, the company has also pointed to manufacturing flaws involving the airbags' explosive, or propellant, including improper exposure to moisture, and problems with a machine that presses propellant powder into tablets. Takata has said both troubles were corrected in the early 2000s.

But the internal documents suggest Takata engineers scrambled as late as 2009 to repair a machine at its Monclova plant that pressed explosive propellant powder into pellets after "inflators tested from multiple propellant lots showed aggressive ballistics," according to the internal presentation in June 2009.

The internal materials and interviews with the former quality-control

"That put a lot of pressure and incentive on us to never miss a shipment," said one of the former managers. "I'd argue, 'what if my daughter bought the car with the bad airbag?' But the plant would tell us, 'Just ship it.' "

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